Chapter # 12

FACILITATING ACCULTURATION IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Borui Zheng[1] & Keegan Covey[2]
[1]*Department of Asian Studies, University College Cork, Ireland*
[2]*Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*

ABSTRACT
In an era of increasing global mobility, Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are experiencing a significant rise in international student enrolments, highlighting the need for enhanced acculturation supports. This study uses a social psychological framework to analyse policy documents, teaching guides, and programme descriptions from a representative sample of Irish universities. It evaluates the inclusivity and effectiveness of these supports through parameters like social trust and psychological well-being. Findings reveal a wide range of acculturation practices, from formal orientation programmes to informal cultural exchange initiatives, though variability exists across institutions. Administrative supports such as visa assistance and housing play a crucial role but have limited impact on social trust and well-being compared to inclusive classroom practices. While culturally responsive teaching is increasingly recognised, structured training and resources for faculty remain insufficient. Social trust—particularly "bridging trust" between diverse groups—emerges as key to successful acculturation, with stronger correlations to psychological well-being than bonding trust within shared identity groups. Inclusive teaching practices are identified as the most effective means to foster social capital and improve psychological health, while administrative supports enhance vertical trust and academic outcomes. The study recommends standardising inclusive teaching practices to better support international students and optimise acculturation outcomes in Irish HEIs.

Keywords: acculturation, international students, irish higher education, inclusive practice, social trust.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the landscape of higher education has undergone profound transformation due to the forces of globalisation, resulting in unprecedented levels of student mobility across international borders. Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are part of this shift, with a substantial rise in the enrolment of international students (Darmody, Groarke, & Mihut, 2022). This demographic evolution presents both opportunities and challenges, emphasising the critical need for comprehensive acculturation supports. Acculturation, the process through which individuals adapt to and integrate into a new cultural environment, is vital for fostering international students' psychological well-being and academic success (Berry, 2005; Can, Poyrazl, & Pillay, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan, 2020).

Existing literature has underscored the impact of acculturation across varied aspects of life, encompassing social trust, psychological health, and academic achievement. Social trust in particular has emerged as a cornerstone of successful acculturation, and entails both

"bridging trust" between diverse identity groups and "vertical trust" between individuals and institutional authorities (Wang, Zhi, & Yu, 2023; Ye, 2018). These foster, respectively, cross-cultural interactions and integration, and confidence in institutional structures. Both dimensions of trust are instrumental in promoting a sense of belonging, emotional stability, and social cohesion within academic environments (Healy, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Despite these insights, gaps remain in the effectiveness and inclusivity of acculturation practices within HEIs. Research points to a disproportionate focus on administrative and logistical supports, such as visa processing and accommodation assistance, which, while essential, have limited impact on psychological well-being and social trust (O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Sebastian & Slaten, 2018). In contrast, inclusive classroom practices and culturally responsive teaching have been identified as being significantly more effective in fostering meaningful integration and supporting students' mental health (Saffari Rad, 2023; Zhou, 2023). These altogether suggest the need to shift from a predominantly procedural approach to a more holistic framework that incorporates emotional and social dimensions of acculturation.

Furthermore, recent studies emphasise the necessity for structured faculty training and institutional policies that promote intercultural competency and inclusive pedagogies. Faculty development programmes designed to address the cultural and academic needs of diverse classrooms remain inconsistent across institutions, often limiting their effectiveness (Gradellini et al., 2021; Lata, 2023). Similarly, mental health supports tailored to the unique challenges faced by international students, such as stress management workshops and culturally sensitive counselling services, vary widely in availability and accessibility (Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Sakız & Jencius, 2024).

In response to these challenges, this study adopts a social psychological analytical framework to evaluate the inclusivity and effectiveness of acculturation supports in Irish HEIs. By systematically analysing policy documents, teaching guides, and programme descriptions, the study identifies variability in the scope and depth of these supports and highlights areas for improvement. The findings call for a recalibration of institutional priorities by way of a standardised and integrated approach that balances administrative assistance with practices to enhance social trust, psychological well-being, and cross-cultural engagement. Such an approach would be valuable as Irish HEIs continue to adapt to the increasing diversity of their student populations and would help to ensure equitable and meaningful support for all students.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to evaluate the acculturation supports available to international students in Irish HEIs. The methodology was well-suited to the exploratory nature of the research, enabling an in-depth examination of policies, programmes, and teaching practices aimed at the integration of international students (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hurley, Ryan, Faulkner, & Wang, 2022; Moran, Green, & Warren, 2021).

2.1. Selection of Documents for Analysis

The selection of universities for this study was carefully designed to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The criteria included institutional size, geographic distribution, and the diversity of student demographics. This included both large universities and smaller institutions, so as to capture a breadth of both formalised supports and informal practices, operationalised under a range of resource constraints. Geographic diversity ensured that the

analysis accounted for potential regional variations in acculturation supports, and demographic considerations were prioritised to reflect institutions with significant international student populations.

While these criteria aimed to ensure a broad representation, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on publicly available documents and institutional responses may have introduced biases, as institutions with well-documented policies were more likely to be included. Furthermore, smaller institutions with limited resources may have underreported their informal supports, potentially skewing the findings. These limitations suggest the need for future studies incorporating direct student and staff perspectives to validate and expand upon these initial findings.

2.2. Analytical Framework

The qualitative content analysis was structured to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the data. The analysis utilised a social psychological framework focusing on three interrelated dimensions: acculturation processes, social trust, and psychological well-being.

Acculturation processes were examined to understand how international students and staff adapt to their new cultural environments, applying strategies of "assimilation", "integration", "separation", or "marginalisation" as defined by whether heritage culture is retained, and whether host culture is adopted (Sam & Berry, 2010; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Social trust was analysed through its two key dimensions—bridging trust, which fosters connections between diverse groups, and vertical trust, which reflects confidence in institutional authorities (Wang et al., 2023; Ye, 2018). Finally, indicators of psychological well-being, such as emotional stability, life satisfaction, and a sense of belonging, were evaluated to assess the holistic impact of acculturation supports (Allen, Fortune, & Arslan, 2021; Gautam et al., 2024). The integration of these dimensions provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how policies and practices influence the acculturation experience.

2.3. Coding and Analysis

Coding categories were iteratively developed based on existing literature and refined through a pilot analysis of selected documents. This iterative process ensured that the categories were theoretically grounded and responsive to emergent themes. The final coding scheme included dimensions such as bridging trust (e.g., buddy systems and cultural events), vertical trust (e.g., transparent grievance mechanisms), and psychological well-being (e.g., counselling services). These categories were applied systematically across the data set to ensure consistency and depth of analysis. The final coding scheme was applied to the entire data set, with adjustments made as necessary to capture emergent themes accurately. The coding categories are tabulated and described in detail, including definitions and examples, in *Table 1* as follows. This approach provided a detailed picture of the strengths and gaps in acculturation supports within Irish HEIs, showing significant variability in the scope and quality of support.

Table 1.
The coding categories.

Category	Definition	Examples
Bridging Trust	Supports that facilitate trust-building between international students and their Irish peers.	- Language exchange programmes - International and local student buddy systems
Vertical Trust	Supports that foster trust between international students and institutional authorities.	- Accessible grievance mechanisms - Transparent communication from administration
Psychological Well-Being	Indicators and supports related to the mental and emotional health of international students.	- Counselling services tailored to international students - Stress management workshops
Acculturation Support	Policies and programmes designed to assist international students in adjusting to the new culture.	- Orientation programmes detailing Irish culture - Guides on navigating academic expectations
Inclusive Teaching Practices	Teaching methods and curricular designs that address the needs of a culturally diverse classroom.	- Multicultural curriculum content - Training for faculty on cultural competency
Administrative and Logistical Support	Services dealing with the logistical aspects of studying abroad, such as housing and visa assistance.	- On-campus accommodation assistance - Visa application guidance

3. FINDINGS

The qualitative content analysis of policy documents, teaching guides, and programme descriptions from a representative sample of Irish HEIs revealed a diverse range of acculturation supports alongside significant gaps in formalised acculturation frameworks. These supports varied widely in scope and implementation, highlighting differences in how institutions address the integration and well-being of international students. The findings can be organised into key themes, with particular emphasis on the interconnection between social trust, psychological well-being, and logistical supports, and the role of inclusive teaching practices in fostering meaningful acculturation.

3.1. Building Trust and Addressing Well-Being

Acculturation supports often aim to build trust and foster psychological well-being among international students, and this study identifies two interrelated dimensions: social trust (bridging and vertical) and well-being. Bridging trust initiatives, designed to strengthen connections between international and local students, included programmes such as language exchanges, cultural sharing events, and buddy systems. These initiatives were particularly effective when well-structured and supported with institutional resources, such

as in the case of buddy systems that incorporated regular meetings, cultural excursions, and academic support sessions provided opportunities for sustained interactions and meaningful relationships (Darmody et al., 2022). Similarly, cultural sharing events promoted mutual understanding and appreciation by allowing students to showcase their cultural traditions, cuisine, and arts, fostering an inclusive campus environment.

However, not all institutions implemented these initiatives effectively. Inconsistent funding and informal oversight often resulted in fragmented and sporadic interactions, limiting their potential to build lasting connections. Language exchange programmes, for example, were more impactful when accompanied by dedicated facilitators and structured schedules, but some institutions reported low participation and engagement due to insufficient promotion or resources.

Vertical trust, which reflects confidence in institutional authorities, was primarily addressed through administrative services like visa processing, housing support, and transparent communication channels. Institutions that actively engaged students through regular town hall meetings, Q&A sessions, and accessible grievance mechanisms were more successful in fostering trust. For example, institutions with dedicated international student offices provided personalised assistance, strengthening students' perceptions of institutional accountability and commitment to their well-being.

Despite the availability of these supports, their impact on fostering deeper trust was limited. Administrative services primarily addressed logistical challenges, such as navigating visa requirements or securing accommodation, without directly influencing students' emotional or social integration. Bridging and vertical trust often intersected in programmes like structured buddy systems, where institutional oversight facilitated not only peer-to-peer connections but also confidence in the university's support structures.

Psychological well-being was another critical dimension identified in the findings. Counselling services, stress management workshops, and social support groups emerged as essential components of acculturation. Institutions with comprehensive mental health programmes, including dedicated counselling centres and active social support groups, provided international students with effective mechanisms to cope with academic pressure, homesickness, and cultural adjustment. However, there were significant disparities in the availability and accessibility of these supports. While some institutions had robust mental health services, others offered only minimal or ad hoc support, leaving students vulnerable to stress and isolation.

The interdependence between social trust and well-being was particularly evident in programmes that addressed multiple dimensions. For instance, stress management workshops combined with peer interaction activities enhanced students' emotional stability while simultaneously fostering bridging trust. This points to the need for institutions to adopt holistic frameworks that integrate social and emotional support systems in order to ensure that international students feel both connected and supported.

3.2. Logistical and Educational Supports

Administrative and logistical supports, such as orientation programmes, visa assistance, and housing services, were widely available across Irish HEIs and were particularly valued for easing the initial transition of international students. Orientation programmes that included detailed sessions on cultural norms, academic expectations, and legal requirements helped students navigate the complexities of studying in a foreign country. Similarly, housing offices that liaised with landlords or provided on-campus accommodation ensured a smoother transition for students unfamiliar with local housing markets.

Despite their importance, these supports were largely limited to addressing short-term needs. For example, while logistical supports reduced the immediate stress of settling into a new environment, they did not contribute significantly to deeper acculturation processes, such as building a sense of belonging or fostering long-term psychological well-being. Institutions that complemented logistical supports with initiatives promoting social interaction and cross-cultural engagement achieved more holistic outcomes. For instance, combining housing services with roommate-matching systems based on shared interests or cultural exchange programmes created opportunities for interpersonal connections and cultural learning.

Inclusive teaching practices also emerged as a critical factor in acculturation. Efforts to incorporate multicultural content into curricula and provide faculty training on cultural competency were noted across several institutions (Darby, 2022). Multicultural curricula that included diverse perspectives and case studies enriched the learning experience by reflecting the global context of higher education. Faculty training workshops on cultural sensitivity and communication styles equipped instructors with the skills to address the diverse needs of their classrooms.

However, the implementation of these practices was often inconsistent. Some institutions offered occasional diversity seminars or standalone training sessions, but without ongoing support or follow-up, their impact was limited. Faculty members frequently expressed uncertainty about how to modify teaching techniques to accommodate students from different educational backgrounds, resulting in missed opportunities for inclusion. Systematic faculty development programmes, including peer mentoring and continuous professional development, were identified as critical for addressing these gaps and creating inclusive learning environments.

3.3. Institutional Variability and Overlaps in Support Dimensions

The findings revealed significant variability in the implementation of acculturation supports across institutions. Buddy systems were consistently strong across all institutions and were implemented widely. In contrast, counselling services exhibited notable disparities, with some institutions achieving high levels of implementation while others lagged behind. Faculty training and orientation programmes showed moderate consistency, but gaps in these areas highlighted the need for more standardised approaches.

This variability underscores the importance of resource allocation and institutional prioritisation. Institutions with higher implementation levels often benefited from strong administrative backing and dedicated funding, while those with lower scores struggled to achieve similar outcomes. Sharing best practices and fostering collaboration between institutions could help bridge these gaps and promote equity in acculturation supports.

The overlap of support dimensions was another key finding, as in *figure 1*. Programmes that simultaneously addressed multiple dimensions, such as structured buddy systems and culturally responsive counselling services, provided the most comprehensive support for international students. For example, peer interaction activities not only fostered bridging trust but also enhanced students' emotional well-being. Similarly, transparent grievance mechanisms and town hall meetings strengthened vertical trust while contributing to students' sense of belonging. These intersections highlight the potential for holistic frameworks that integrate bridging trust, vertical trust, and psychological well-being, ensuring that students benefit from interconnected and mutually reinforcing supports.

Figure 1.
Overlap of Support Dimensions.
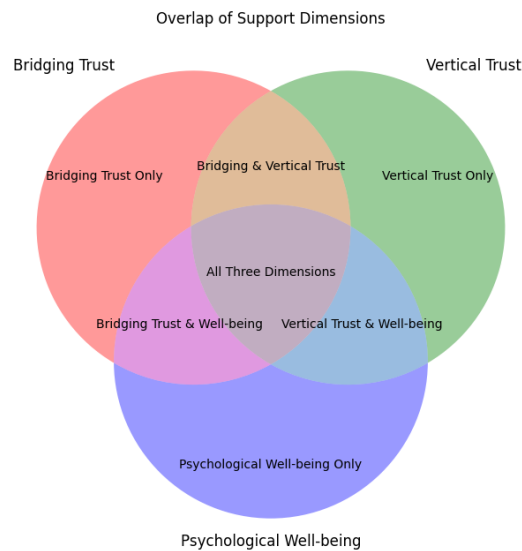
The findings altogether emphasised the need for HEIs to adopt integrated and standardised, if flexible and adaptive, approaches to acculturation supports. While existing initiatives address various aspects of social trust, well-being, and logistical needs, inconsistencies in implementation limit their overall impact. Prioritising programmes that overlap multiple dimensions and promoting collaboration between institutions can help HEIs to create more inclusive and supportive environments for international students. These efforts are critical both for fostering successful acculturation and for enriching the educational experience of all students within increasingly diverse academic communities.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this research underscored the complexities of acculturation support within HEIs, with challenges provided by both variation in resources and standards or guidance. The study further demonstrated the necessity of balancing logistical services with social and emotional integration mechanisms. While administrative supports provide essential groundwork, their effectiveness is limited without complementary efforts to foster interpersonal connections and psychological well-being. Bridging trust initiatives, such as structured language exchanges and buddy systems, emerged as critical to promoting cross-cultural understanding, but their success hinged on institutional commitment and resources.

The analysis also revealed gaps in mental health and well-being supports, with inconsistencies across institutions exacerbating challenges for international students. A standardised approach to providing accessible mental health resources and fostering cultural competency in teaching practices is imperative to addressing these disparities.

To maximise the impact of acculturation efforts, institutions are recommended to adopt an integrated strategy that aligns administrative supports with initiatives promoting social trust and inclusive teaching. Through prioritisation of both structural and interpersonal elements of acculturation, HEIs can create environments that support international students' transitions as well as foster long-term integration and academic success.

5. CONCLUSION

This study accentuates the pressing need for a comprehensive and standardised approach to acculturation support within Irish HEIs. The findings emphasise that while logistical supports are foundational, they must be supplemented with initiatives fostering social integration, psychological well-being, and inclusive teaching. HEIs that implement transparent communication, structured faculty development, and culturally responsive practices are better positioned to support the holistic needs of international students.

While the study focused on Irish HEIs, its findings hold relevance for other English-speaking countries and universities, particularly in the post-Brexit context. Institutions in these countries face similar challenges as they accommodate increasing numbers of international students, particularly from countries of origin within the EU. The emphasis on bridging and vertical trust, combined with holistic acculturation practices, offers a framework that can be adapted to foster inclusion and well-being in broader contexts.

Moving forward, HEIs where possible should focus on deploying integrated programmes that balance administrative, social, and emotional dimensions of acculturation. Policymakers accordingly would be advised to offer greater resources to both guide and implement such programmes, so as to enhance the educational experience for international students, foster meaningful connections, and generally contribute to a more inclusive academic community. These practices offer a blueprint for addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by an increasingly globalised higher education landscape.

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AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Full name: Borui Zheng
Institutional affiliation: Department of Asian Studies, University College Cork
Institutional address: O'Rahilly Building, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland
Short biographical sketch: Borui is a researcher specializing in psychological education with a focus on the intersection of acculturation, psychological well-being, and educational practices. Her work focus on the experiences of migrants, exploring second language acquisition, intercultural dynamics, and the impact of inclusive educational interventions on mental health and social integration. She is particularly interested in innovative approaches that bridge cultural divides, enhance intercultural communication, and foster supportive learning environments for diverse student populations. Her current research investigates how educational systems can better support migrant and international students, contributing to more equitable and inclusive academic spaces globally.

Full name: Keegan Covey
Institutional affiliation: Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin
Institutional address: Museum Building Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland
Short biographical sketch: Keegan Covey is a researcher specialising in conflict resolution, governance, sustainable development, and climate adaptation. His work applies positive peace principles to address structural and cultural violence in conflict-affected regions. Using diverse methodologies, including survey design, geospatial analysis, and statistical modelling, he explores the links between environmental vulnerability, social justice, and resource management. His interdisciplinary approach underpins his contributions to political participation, environmental policy, and peacebuilding, with a focus on fostering sustainable, inclusive solutions to global challenges.